

The Causes of Chinese College Students' Anxiety in English Speaking Learning - A Case Study Based on the IELTS Speaking Test

Wang Canran*

Chinese Language and Literature, Chengdu Jincheng College, Chengdu, Sichuan, China

**Corresponding author*

Abstract: For foreign language learners, speaking is considered to be the most anxiety-producing of the four basic language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. In order to solve the problem of college students' speaking anxiety and promote their IELTS speaking learning, this study conducted semi-structured interviews with three IELTS test takers and explored the sources of Chinese college students' speaking anxiety, with a view to shedding light on IELTS speaking teaching.

Keywords: Sources of Perceived Anxiety; Speaking Anxiety; College Students

1. Introduction

"Dumb English" has always been the biggest bottleneck for Chinese English learners. To a large extent, "mute English" is a manifestation of oral English anxiety. Therefore, revealing the causes of oral English anxiety is the key to understanding and solving the problem of "mute English". The impact of anxiety on foreign language learning has been recognized for a long time, and among the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, speaking anxiety has received the most attention [1]. This study takes the IELTS speaking test as the main research scenario to explore the perceived sources of English speaking anxiety among Chinese college students.

2. Theories Related to Anxiety and Foreign Language Anxiety

Anxiety is the subjective feeling of nervousness, fear, tension and worry associated with automatic nervous system arousal [2], and anxiety is usually associated with improved or impaired performance of a person in a given situation [3]. According to Li Jungying, foreign language learning anxiety mainly refers to the fear or uneasiness that learners feel when they

express themselves in the target language. Students experience foreign language anxiety when learning a new language, especially in speaking activities, test situations and other specific contexts.

Since foreign language anxiety is closely related to learners' language learning outcomes and test scores, it is essential to explore the sources of anxiety. Second language acquisition and language testing studies have concluded that a variety of factors affect students' language performance and test scores in different contexts. During the course of an examination, candidates can become anxious when faced with unsure or unfamiliar topics and other new situations, and candidates' performance can be affected accordingly, especially when faced with highly innovative or relatively unfamiliar examination topics. Regardless of language level, candidates are affected by unfamiliar titles, often negatively. Fear of negative ratings or face-to-face interactions from raters may have a negative impact on students' interactions with their teachers or other classmates, which in turn may affect their motivation to practice speaking, especially during conversational practice on exams or in the classroom. Speaking interactions or feedback may also increase students' anxiety levels, as it may cause test takers to feel immediately anxious or make them feel uncertain about the outcome of the test.

It is clear from the above literature that many sources of anxiety are closely related to the test-taking situation, and in this study three of the most relevant sources to test-taking have been selected for discussion: unfamiliarity with the test questions, the students' level of linguistic competence, and the verbal or written interactions and feedback that may occur during the test-taking process. All three of these sources of anxiety may be factors that influence test-taker performance.

3. Rationale for the Research Question

With regard to research on anxiety and specific language skills, speaking anxiety is a four-skill (listening, reading, speaking, writing) research hotspots, e.g. Chinese students' reticence and anxiety change over time in speaking test situations; Chinese college students' speaking test anxiety and speaking strategies affect candidates' English speaking performance [4]; Teachers play an important role in decreasing students' speaking anxiety in the classroom; Examination Speaking performance of both low and high language level students in the examination is affected and so on. In addition, there are also studies on reading anxiety and listening anxiety, but among the studies on test anxiety, there are relatively few studies on the language anxiety of test takers in the context of large-scale oral examinations, and it is necessary to explore the speaking anxiety of test takers in them. The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is one of the most popular large-scale English language examinations (IELTS 2018). There are three parts, Part 1, Part 2 and Part 3, each with different content and objectives.

Part 1: Introduction and Interview In Part 1, the examiner will give a brief introduction and interview to the candidate. The main purpose is to assess the candidate's basic communication skills, fluency, intonation, vocabulary and grammar.

Part 2: Long Turn In Part 2, candidates are given a topic card and are given 1-2 minutes to answer a question on the topic. This part is designed to test the candidate's ability to express themselves orally, organize their thoughts, use grammar and vocabulary, and expand and support ideas.

Part 3: Discussion In Part 3, the test will continue with the topic from Part 2, and the candidate and the examiner will have some more in-depth discussions on the topic. This part of the test mainly examines the candidate's ability to understand and analyze complex topics, and whether he or she can put forward and support his or her own views on the topic.

There are a large number of IELTS test takers in China, and listening to their views on IELTS Speaking can shed light on the reasons why they feel anxious about their IELTS Speaking test experience.

4. Research Question

The purpose of this study was to explore the sources of perceived anxiety among Chinese students about the IELTS Speaking test. The research questions are.

(1) Do Chinese test takers feel anxious when they encounter unfamiliar topics in the speaking test?

(2) Does the test cause different levels of anxiety for candidates with different language levels (high, medium, and low)?

(3) Do Chinese test takers feel anxious about how the examiners will evaluate and score the test?

Subjects

Compared with other Chinese university English learners, most of the students facing the IELTS test have the need to study abroad, which makes speaking ability and the IELTS speaking score particularly important to them.

Interview subjects: 3 (non-English majors)

Students from 985 colleges (1) One college (1)

Private colleges (1)

Selection criteria:

(1) **Number of exams:** IELTS learners who are preparing for the exam or who have only taken the exam once. They will have a self-perception of their English language level (Council of Europe 2001).

(2) **Purpose of the test:** IELTS is taken for the direct purpose of studying abroad.

Interviewee background: Native Chinese speaking students in their junior or senior year of college.

5. Research Methodology

Semi-structured interviews were used in this study to present the perspectives, understandings and experiences of the interviewees. The questions in the semi-structured interviews were relatively standardized in order to minimize the differences in the questions in the sub-interviews in order to obtain the different perspectives and understandings of the interviewees on the same issue.

According to the research questions, in addition to the introductory questions required for the interviews, the main interview questions were divided into three parts: the first part on "anxiety due to unfamiliarity with the subject matter", the second part on "anxiety at the level of language proficiency", and the third part on "scoring anxiety". The first part was about "anxiety due to unfamiliarity with the topic", the second part was about "anxiety at the language level level",

and the third part was about “scoring anxiety”. Each part of the interview began with a leading question that elicited a more open-ended response, then useful information from the

response, and the interview was targeted to clarify and identify the question before concluding with a transitional question for the next part of the interview, as shown in table 1.

Table 1. The Introductory Questions Required for the Interviews

Anonymity	Gender	Age	Self-perception of language level	Reasons to prepare for IELTS	IELTS Speaking Score	Major field of study (at university)
A	Male	21	B1	Study abroad	Unexamined	Chinese language and literature
B	Female	20	B1	Exchange studies, study abroad	6.0	Study of journalism
C	Male	21	B2	study abroad	5.0	Chinese language and literature

6. Introductory Questions

Example 1: In the IELTS Speaking test, do you feel anxious because you are unfamiliar with the topic?

Example 2: Do you feel anxious about how the markers will grade you before and after the test? Illustrative questions (eliciting more thoughts from respondents based on their answers)

Example 1: You said you were concerned about unfamiliarity, right? Can you be more specific?

Example 2: So, you are saying that you didn't feel lonely during the preparation process, but did this feeling accompany you to the examination room during the actual examination?

Example 3: Did you feel any pressure from your parents during the preparation process, and was this feeling present in the actual test?

Confirmatory questions (digging more into the answer to the previous question and inspiring the respondent to say more)

Example 1: I understand. But what exactly is the anxiety you feel when you make up fake experiences to use as examples on the speaking test? Isn't it okay to make up random examples? Why do you feel anxious?

Example 2: So, when you have time to think about it after writing it, do you feel anxious about how many points you will get or how the examiner will grade it?

Transition Questions (Transition to next section)

Example 1: Okay, you feel a little differently than I do, and that's very helpful for our study.

7. Analysis

This study analyzes the responses of the above three interviewees by organizing and analyzing the contents of the answers, and extracting the key contents according to the three parts of the interviews for specific analysis.

The Most Important Source of Perceived

Anxiety: Unfamiliarity with the Speaking Test Topics

In the interviews, when the interviewers mentioned whether they felt anxious in the IELTS Speaking test because of unfamiliar topics, most of the interviewees said that they would be very anxious, and that this kind of anxiety existed in other tests as well, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Interview Part I

Categorisation	Record (in sports etc)
Feeling	I'm very flustered.
	Nervous, afraid to change the question.
	Less anxious in the later stages.
Manifestations	Just play it cool and start making things up.
	Trying to remember the topics you prepared before the exam.
	You can say a lot of things off the top of your head when you get good at it.

Respondents generally agreed that the source of anxiety about the speaking test was unfamiliarity with the speaking test topics. When faced with an unfamiliar topic, the test requires you to "make up" some experiences to answer and enrich the topic. Whether or not these sound appropriate, it does not make you feel relaxed, and may even increase the feeling of nervousness, leading to speaking anxiety. IELTS, as the basis for university applications, is a high-stakes test, which is a major source of speaking anxiety, which in turn affects writing performance and therefore performance.

Perceived language proficiency and its impact on test performance

Interviewees gave different answers to the question about the relationship between their language level and anxiety, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Interview Part II

Perceived Language Proficiency	record (in sports etc)
	My English was already very poor, especially in speaking.
	My English was OK, but I haven't used it for a long time.
	My English was not very good, average level, but I have studied it seriously for a long time.
Reflections on the preparation process	I feel that I can't communicate with foreigners at all.
	Reflections on the preparation process When I encounter English words I don't know, I use the same substitution for simpler expressions, so I'm not too anxious.
	My mind goes blank, I don't know what to say, and I pause for a long time.
	I should be able to give it a go.

Respondents generally felt that their language proficiency had improved as a result of adequate preparation for the examination, which was the main reason why speaking anxiety was not evident in response to this question. Candidates' perceptions of language anxiety due to language proficiency varied. Language anxiety may have a negative impact on the performance of low proficiency candidates, but not on high proficiency candidates.

Scoring uncertainty and its effect on anxiety

None of the candidates in this study believed that language anxiety stemmed from uncertainty about the credibility of the scoring.

Uncertainty about ratings and their effect on anxiety

None of the candidates in this study perceived language anxiety as stemming from uncertainty about the credibility of their writing ratings as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. The Credibility of Their Writing Ratings

Rater Scoring Criteria	record (in sports etc)
	I wouldn't dare to doubt the raters, they're supposed to be very good, right?
	The test criteria should be quantified, so there won't be any mistakes, right?
	I don't have too many guesses about how the graders will grade, I just focus on preparing for the exam and taking the test.
	I think they seem to be very good at English.

Respondents felt that their main responsibility during the examination was to complete the examination and not to think about marking. They trust the professionalism of well-trained markers. The marking criteria are published on the official IELTS website, so the information is open and transparent. One respondent said that anxiety about the credibility of marking occurs more in the preparation or post-test phase rather than during the test.

This result suggests that candidates do not believe that anxiety stems from uncertainty about the marking; rather, candidates believe that the marking is beyond their control and that they do not need to feel anxious about this uncertainty, and that in IELTS Speaking, the candidate's role is successfully to complete the conversation with the speaking examiner and answer the examiner's questions.

8. Conclusion

This study examines the sources of Chinese students' anxiety about the IELTS Speaking test. First, unfamiliar speaking topics and unfamiliarity with the speaking test topics are most likely to trigger anxiety and affect performance. Second, adequate preparation and extensive practice help students improve their language skills and gain confidence. This helps to reduce learners' anxiety. Thirdly, uncertainty in marking does not have a significant effect on candidates' anxiety during the test, but it may have some effect on students before and after the test.

References

- [1] Daly J A. Understanding communication apprehension: An introduction for language educators [A]. In Horwitz E K & Young D J. Language Anxiety: From Theory and Research to Classroom Implications [C]. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1991. 3—13.
- [2] Alpert R & Haber R N. Anxiety in academic achievement situations [J]. Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 1960, 61(2): 207—215
- [3] Spielberger C D. Manual for the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI) [M]. Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press, 1983.
- [4] Zhang W X & Liu M H. Evaluating the

Higher Education and Practice Vol. 1 No. 9, 2024

impact of oral test anxiety and speaking
strategy use on oral English performance

 Academic Education
Publishing House

[J]. The Journal of Asia TEFL, 2013,
10(2): 115–148.